Mad in America
SCIENCE, PSYCHIATRY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

# The Psychiatric Peddlers in Your Schools

By **Michael Lucas** - February 20, 2024

As a teacher in the public school system I encountered the following kind of student in each of my classes. They were usually wont to ignore my instructions; they would lose their notebook or writing utensil; fail to complete their classwork and forget their unattempted homework at home; avoid beginning any task I gave them by concocting a much more urgent assignment for themselves like needing to organize all the papers in their bag; and they'd space out on a window or painting, or more often drop their chin to their hand and stare at their desk.

No doubt these behaviors are ubiquitous in every classroom, at every school, in every country, and at every time throughout history. Yes, I'm sure even Plato suffered such disinterest on the part of his students, which would most likely explain the antics of his pupil, Diogenes, who ran into Plato's seminar with a plucked chicken crying: Behold! A man! What is a teacher to make of such foolishness, or of such contempt for learning? Historically, the treatment would be discipline. More often than not, this discipline would take the form of mild corporal punishment—the quick *snap* of a ruler on the knuckles of lil' John boy. What was the point? To break him of his slovenly habits and encourage the *diligent* exercise of his attention to the task at hand. Now, don't mistake me for endorsing corporal punishment in schools—far from it! Rather, the practice of punishment acknowledges a simple fact: young minds wander and need to be redirected.

Contemporary education readily acknowledges this fact. Miss Brown approaches lil' John boy and gently affirms his efforts: "Johnny, what are we supposed to be doing right now? Take out your notebook and begin performing the sums on the board. Very good." Just as Johnny opens his bag, Mikey catches her attention. She approaches him and tells him to pick up his pencil, to start with question number six. Already three minutes have gone by and lil' John boy *finally* has his notebook out. But oh no! it's the wrong one… You can see where this is going—lil' John boy will make an excellent senator the way he filibusters class time. If only he could apply himself to his study of history and government he would be well qualified for the job (But who are we kidding? Those aren't prerequisites for becoming a senator). Just how effective do you think Miss Brown's *gentle* affirmations will be? They impose no consequence. They reinforce nothing. At best, a student is annoyed by the unwanted attention from the teacher, but he is aided by the slacking off of his classmates who redirect the teacher's attention. And in today's schools, there is no shortage of John boys or Mikeys.

So what is our teacher, Miss Brown, to do? Why, she can send an email home to John boy's parents—make them aware of his deficits. Well, if they just so happen to read it and the parents are worth their salt, John boy's behavior will change for a day or two, perhaps a week. In any case, once the half-life of the email expires, John boy will require further discipline. This time he'll need a detention—to stay

in Miss Brown's classroom during lunch. However, Miss Brown will discover that John boy buys his lunch from the cafeteria, and since she's not allowed to withhold food from him, he goes to the cafeteria to buy his lunch. He returns "promptly" thirty-five minutes later and explains that "the line was long" or that "they ran out of food and had to make more." In total he serves a five minute detention. Who has suffered more? John boy who got to chat it up with his friends and put down a hefty meal, or Miss Brown who waited in angst for her pupil to arrive while grading sloppy, half-assed assignments, knowing full well that John boy got the better of her, and worse—knowing that he knew it too?

So it seems our teacher will have to adopt more draconian methods. She can issue an after-school detention but this inevitably provokes the ire of the parents whose schedules are thrown out of whack. Miss Brown wants to avoid this at all costs since the parents will blame *her* for the inconvenience, not John boy. So maybe she schedules a detention for later in the week to give the family due time to prepare. This is no good either. You see, John boy has a soccer tournament that day and will be dismissed two hours before the end of the school day. And Miss Brown will not be made aware of this until the day of. So she may attempt again and again to enforce some kind of punishment while John boy continues to underperform in class.

Frustrated, our teacher goes to the faculty lounge and discovers two other teachers talking about a number of "problem" students, including John boy. They note his inattentiveness, slowness to complete tasks, procrastination in beginning assignments and failure to complete others entirely. The sympathetic conversation is invigorating to Miss Brown who feels vindicated in her attempts to discipline John boy. But soon the conversation turns to conspiracy, and Miss Brown is disquieted by her colleagues' prescriptions.

Mrs. Green, a veteran teacher, has seen this kind of behavior before. She notes that it has only gotten worse throughout her many years in the profession. Mr. Blue is highly educated. His undergrad is in Biology, he has a master's in education and was trained as a lawyer. He confirms Mrs. Green's anecdotes by reference to a number of *scientific* studies—the absolute pinnacle of knowledge. He rattles on about statistics, techniques, "behavioral interventions" and other technologies that show "statistically significant" effects in modifying student

and adolescent behavior. Mrs. Green commends Mr. Blue for his informed and scholarly appraisal of the most relevant and timely scientific literature, even offering her own recommendations on the subject. Ms. Brown, on the other hand, is utterly perturbed by all this. For all their knowledge of the scientific literature and their steadfast implementation of these so-called "techniques" John boy is still a poor student. Mr. Blue rejoins, "Of course he is. After all, he's *clearly* suffering from ADHD." "Likely ADD as well," Mrs. Green adds. A third voice chimes in: "Might he be on the spectrum as well?" Murmurs, nods and speculation abound in the break room.

Mrs. Green and Mr. Blue then proceed to diagnose a number of other students. This would be all well and good if it remained purely conversational in nature. Alas, it does not. Mrs. Green and Mr. Blue regularly meet with the parents of these "problem" children in the presence of administrators who, without fail, claim to have done absolutely everything to improve the educational outcomes of the child. While their interventions have been specifically catered toward the student in the form of an Individual Education Plan, untold forces have conspired to thwart their efforts. Inevitably, the teachers and administrators in the room suggest that the child be "tested." "Talk to your doctor and see if anything can be done." Of course this means only one thing: feed your child amphetamines.

Why is there this urge to prescribe amphetamines to children? It can only be to absolve the teacher, the student and the parents of any accountability. No, your student is not failing because I am an incompetent teacher; your student is not failing because you fail to reinforce any sort of habits at home, or to discipline them in ways that the school cannot; your student is not failing because they are lazy, uninterested or simply incapable of succeeding at the current level. Your student is failing for reasons that are outside of anyone's control. Nature has simply dealt your child a bad hand. This is the great lie told to parents by energetic teachers eager to claim expertise in a subject they are utterly unqualified to possess.

The DSM-5, published by the American Psychiatric Association, lists the following criteria to diagnose ADHD:

- Displays poor listening skills
- Loses and/or misplaces items needed to complete activities or tasks
- Sidetracked by external or unimportant stimuli
- Forgets daily activities
- Diminished attention span
- Lacks ability to complete schoolwork and other assignments or to follow instructions
- Avoids or is disinclined to begin homework or activities requiring concentration
- Fails to focus on details and/or makes thoughtless mistakes in schoolwork or assignments

Notice the complete lack of biomarkers, the complete lack of brain scans, the complete lack of cellular pathology and the total reliance on self-reporting. This constitutes science? This is medicine? If there were any medical basis to this condition at all there would be no need for self-reporting and we would simply run some tests that indicate whether a body is physiologically non-normal. We would look for physical abnormalities, cellular lesions and otherwise, as is the case for diagnosing every other illness or disease. Yet psychiatry is happy to accept your patronage, the pharmaceutical industry is happy to keep pressing pills, teachers are content to pat themselves on the back for a job well done, and students are elated to receive a performance-enhancing drug.

There should be no doubt that ADHD medications (in particular, Adderall, since it is so widely prescribed) confer cognitive benefits to users. Prescribing stimulants of this kind increase “alertness, energy, academic performance, athletic performance, facilitate weight loss, and produce feelings of euphoria.” But the benefits go far beyond the chemical advantages of the drug. A huge benefit for students, parents and teachers in having Adderall and Ritalin-like drugs prescribed to students is the accompanying legal document: the 504 plan. A 504 is a student education plan guaranteed to students with disabilities according to the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, section 504. What are its benefits? A student who receives a 504 plan is overwhelmingly conferred all of the following

privileges: 1) additional time to complete classwork; 2) additional time to complete tests (up to 50% of the class time); 3) preferential seating; 4) exclusive testing rooms; 5) reduced homework loads; 6) additional time to complete homework (if an assignment is assigned on Monday and due on Friday, a student does not have to turn it in until Wednesday the following week); 7) recordings of lectures and access to teacher's lesson plans and notes; 8) dedicated attention from the teacher in explaining instructions and the meaning of questions on assignments and exams.

Does all of this seem reasonable? Maybe so. Does it seem reasonable when 30% of your students have these exact provisions? Does it seem reasonable when these students occupy the same classrooms as undiagnosed, unprivileged students? How well can a teacher be expected to deliver item #8 to ten students simultaneously? Or to give preferential seating to ten students simultaneously? Some inevitable leeway will have to be given. But notwithstanding these minor hiccups, consider how likely a student is to succeed if given a reduced workload both inside and outside of class; how likely they are to improve their test scores when given an hour and a half as opposed to an hour; how likely they are to increase their homework grades when given nine days instead of four; and how likely they are to succeed, regardless of any of these conferred benefits, when they are running on literal Speed. When all of these effects are weighed in the final analysis, of course teachers will tell you "I told you so." Of course parents will glow when viewing their child's latest report card. Of course administrators will be happy to report that they have a "100% graduation rate, an average GPA of 3.9 and a ranking as an 'A' school" by the state Department of Education. All the while, the student will suffer.

Why? Because the "caring" and "concerned" adults who had the "future" and "best interests" of the student in mind will have implicitly been telling them this: You are broken. You cannot be fixed except by medical intervention. You are incapable of succeeding on your own merit and must therefore submit to the following psychotropic regimen to have the slightest chance of making it in this world. You are nothing without this drug. You will fail without it. It's not your fault, but you have no choice.

This is wicked and insidious. It is foul and corrupt. It is heartlessness and

selfishness masked as compassion and pity. It is morally depraved and unambiguously counter-productive. The purpose of education is to rear children into morally, physically and intellectually competent adults. Their greatest lesson is that the world cares not a whit for your past tribulations, current difficulties or future concerns. Society cares only for what you can offer; whether that be moral, physical or intellectual value. It is for these reasons that we train them to be competent in these areas. It is by acknowledging their incompetence—their unpreparedness—and doing what is necessary to aid them in becoming mature and capable adults that they may live lives of dignity and pride. We do them no favors by excusing their deficits and describing their problems as "unfortunate" and "inescapable" facts of life. The problems of students that schools and psychiatry attempt to address are normal occurrences, and have been normal occurrences for as long as we have had records of student behavior. It is the task of educators (parents included) to equip children with the tools necessary to conquer the natural difficulties of growing up. Children *must* be disciplined to discipline both their behavior *and* their minds. These goals are regularly accomplished the world over, have been accomplished in days past, and ought to be accomplished today. The failure of parents and educators in this regard is the result of nothing other than their own lack of discipline. While we may no longer snap rulers on the knuckles of errant students, this does not mean that we ought to substitute drugs and diminished expectations for the expectation that students *pay attention*, *do their work*, or otherwise *suffer the consequences*.

It is true that what is good is often difficult, but that does not mean that it is not still necessary. If we are to do a proper job of preparing our children for life, we must train them as life surely will—with discipline. We make no exceptions. We hold them to high standards. We reward them with praise for doing good and doing right. And we punish them with shame and disappointment for doing wrong. Do you think this approach heartless? You've forgotten, then, the most fundamental principle of behavioral psychology: reward the behaviors you like and punish the behaviors you hate. Life will do this for them if we do not. So which would you prefer? To teach them as life would when the costs are low and the rewards high? Or would you defer their education till after their schooling when the costs are high and the rewards small? You are welcome to conduct this experiment as many others have been doing for decades, but look to those new men and women first and then tell me if you are impressed by the results.

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